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ABSTRACT

This article by Patricia Whitelaw-Hill, Executive Director of READ, addresses the issue of the education of limited-English students in public education. New York has joined California in concluding that bilingual education programs are not working as well as English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) programs in helping language minority students become mainstreamed. Support for bilingual education has been based largely on untested and unsubstantiated academic theories that emphasize instruction in the student's native language. Rapid learning of English for school purposes and the early integration of limited-English-proficient (LEP) students into regular classrooms with English-speaking peers is preferable. These programs are in place in many areas but have not been adequately acknowledged. A large part of the problem has been confusion between program goals and objectives. Bilingual education's objectives of maintaining and increasing native language skills have conflicted with their goals of teaching English. A number of current strategies are appropriate for developing English language skills, including sheltered English instruction, cooperative learning, grouping, project work, and learning centers; all can be used to facilitate both English language learning and academic content mastery. An essential ingredient is for schools to have the flexibility to respond to students' needs and to design appropriate programs, particularly as immigrant populations increase. (MSE)

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By Patricia Whitelaw-Hill

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NEWS FROM READ

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THE INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH IN ENGLISH ACQUISITION AND DEVELOPMENT

Setting Achievement Goals for Language Minority Students

by Patricia Whitelaw-Hill
Executive Director, READ

No issue in public education in the United States arouses more emotion than the education of limited-English students. Research on the subject has often been contradictory, appearing to be based more on opinion than on fact. Despite almost 30 years of intensive efforts to educate non-English speaking children, several states are now acknowledging the failure of their special programs. In both New York City and California, reports have detailed the failure of bilingual education programs to prepare language minority students for the mainstream classroom.

On October 14th, the Chancellor of the New York City Schools issued a report on a 4-year study, "The Educational Progress of Students in Bilingual and English as a Second Language Programs." Although it is called a preliminary study, it shows clearly that the bilingual education programs are not working as well as the English as a second language (ESL) Programs in helping students learn English well enough to be mainstreamed into regular school programs. In ESL programs, students are given instruction in English while they are taught English. In bilingual programs, students are taught most subjects in their native language.

Exit rates by type of program after 3 years

Grade level of Entering student	ESL	Bilingual
Kindergarten	79.3%	51.5%
2nd	67.5%	22.1%
6th	32.7%	6.9%

The report compares three-year exit rates for limited-English students who entered New York City schools in kindergarten and grades 2 and 6. At all grade levels, students in the ESL-only programs were mainstreamed faster than the students in the bilingual programs. On average, 59.8% of the ESL students surveyed were mainstreamed after three years compared to only 26.8% of the bilingual program students. About 79% of students who entered ESL classes in kindergarten were able to test out within three years, but only 51% of students who entered bilingual classes in kindergarten were able to test out in the same time period.

New York is the second major state to acknowledge the failure of bilingual programs to meet the English language needs of their students. In California, the state with the largest language minority population in the

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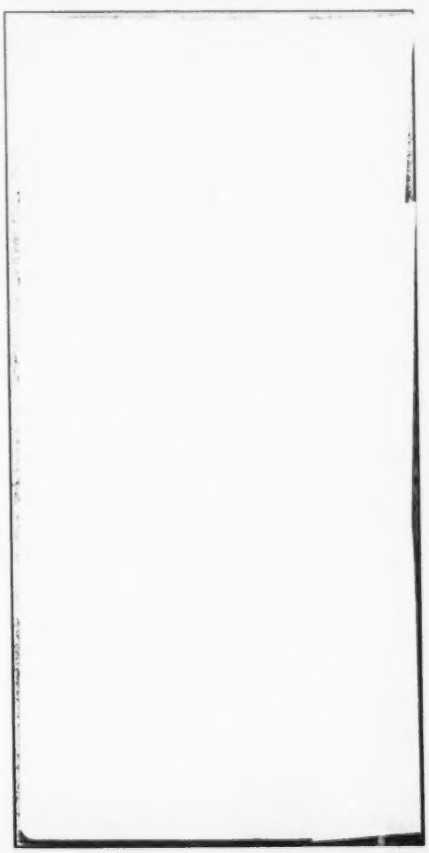

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country, the Little Hoover Commission, an independent and bipartisan state oversight agency, issued its findings on bilingual education in July of last year. It found that California was not meeting its primary educational goal of helping immigrant students to become fluent in English quickly and that the state Department of Education's emphasis on native-language instruction in bilingual programs was "inappropriate, unwarranted, unfeasible, and counterproductive."

A Focus on Theories Rather than Results

These reports came as no surprise to many who have been involved in the education of limited-English students. Concerns were often stifled in the past as the observations of teachers and students were given less credence than the theories on which bilingual education is based. Many administrators and parents have embraced the concept of bilingual education because it was billed as the most effective way of achieving fluency in English. The fact is, however, that the support for bilingual education has been based on untested and unsubstantiated academic theories that emphasize instruction in the student's native language over the acquisition of English. Now, after nearly thirty years of direct experience with bilingual programs, the results are clear – they don't work.

So what does work?

Given the prevalence of academic and bureaucratic support for native language programs and the heavy funding that has gone into them, many throw up their hands and cry "But what's the alternative?" What has always been there – special English teaching programs whose twin goals are the rapid learning of English for school purposes and the early integration of limited-English students into the regular classrooms with their English-speaking peers. Students will learn what we teach them, and if we don't teach them English, we can hardly be surprised when they don't learn it! To be successful, students need adequate time for exposure to the language as well as competent and focused instruction. There is very little mystery about it – successful programs exist, but they have not received the attention they merit.

Contradictions Between Goals and Objectives

A large part of the problem has been the confusion between goals and objectives. The rationale and ostensible goal for bilingual programs has always been to teach English. The theory is that developing cognitive skills in the native language ultimately supports the development of the second language, English, while building academic skills and preparing students for the mainstream. However, the objectives have usually involved maintaining and increasing native language skills to ensure self-esteem and build cognitive skills in students. Thus the objectives have been at odds with the overall goals of the program, and the unintended outcome is that students do not have adequate instruction in English. From the results it is now clear that unless more time is spent on instruction in English and less in the native language, the transition to English won't take place.

Under such circumstances, is it surprising that programs for limited-English students are not succeeding? The students are not learning what they most urgently need for school achievement because it is not being taught to them. It's a very simple concept, although it does run counter to the theory that language skills will somehow automatically transfer from one language to another. We must teach them the language they will need in order to succeed in the U.S. To do this the objectives must be in line with the desired goals.

Fortunately, some of the recent trends in education are timely. "Sheltered English as a Second Language" classes where academic subjects are taught through English lend themselves to theme-based learning and individualization for different learning styles. All these strategies are essential in teaching students from different cultures. Cooperative learning, different groupings, project work, and learning centers are among the resources for both English language and mainstream teachers. There does not need to be a choice between second language acquisition and academic content mastery; they are perfectly compatible, although the debate has often been framed as if they were mutually exclusive.

Modern language teaching has benefited from all of the insights of technology and modern pedagogy; we've come a long way from the days of dry-as-dust language drills that were still prevalent in the early days of bilingual education! The integration of language teaching and academic content has the potential to deliver exciting results. We need not fear that either academic progress or the development of cognitive skills will be delayed by learning in English.

Flexibility is Essential

What is essential, of course, is that schools have the flexibility to respond to their students' needs and design programs that will work for them. As our immigrant populations continue to grow, these issues will receive more and closer scrutiny. In the current 94/95 school year, for example, New York City public schools have enrolled 18,000 new immigrant students in addition to the 138,000 immigrants already enrolled over the last four

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Flexibility is Essential

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years. The system is now providing programs for students from 46 countries speaking 37 different languages. It is therefore essential that administrators be very clear about the desired outcomes of their programs. We now know what the outcomes of different programs are, although results will vary according to local student populations and conditions. Programs with the goal of helping students achieve fluency in English must encompass objectives that are clearly related to reaching that goal, and they must be based on methods that have been demonstrated to give results rather than on unsubstantiated theories.

(A review of the New York City Public Schools Bilingual Program Reevaluation will be featured in the October, 1995 issue of READ Perspectives, along with reviews on alternative programs for limited-English students.)